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SUBJECT: EU FOREIGN MINISTERS PRESS LIVNI ON OPENING GAZA,
SEEK WAYS TO HELP ON SUSTAINING CEASE FIRE

Classified By: USEU Charge d'Affaires, a.i., Christopher Murray for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Tomas Smetanka, Middle East Advisor at the Czech Permanent Representation in Brussels, told us that, during their January 21 dinner meeting with Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, EU Foreign Ministers pressed for an immediate humanitarian opening of Gaza, for a permanent opening for people and goods so as not to further legitimize Hamas, and asked what the EU could do to help make the cease-fire permanent. According to Smetanka, Livni promised to ensure immediate access for EU humanitarian missions, but expressed caution on a general opening, saying that if it were done without Palestinian Authority (PA) involvement it would legitimize Hamas. She asked for help in controlling arms flows to Hamas as the most important element in maintaining the cease-fire. Smetanka said the EU Foreign Ministers would try to follow the same agenda for their meeting January 25 with counterparts from Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Smetanka opened by expressing some relief that the Czechs had a "nice surprise" because the ministers had an "almost united message" during the meeting with Livni, despite some expressions beforehand (especially in public statements by the French) that some might argue it was time to talk to Hamas. The dinner with Livni was preceded by a short coordination meeting that meant the EU was "mostly" united in the discussion.

¶3. (C) The EU pressed Livni for an immediate opening for humanitarian relief as the top priority. The Czech Foreign Minister told her the EU wanted to see aid "unobstructed and in sufficient quantity" allowed in. Smetanka said Livni was "rather cooperative," but had a narrower vision of what constituted humanitarian assistance than did the foreign ministers. EU ministers pressed Israel to allow in fuel and cement, and not just basic food and medical supplies, as part of immediate humanitarian assistance. According to Smetanka, Livni said she was surprised to hear that an EU presidency assessment mission was turned away that day despite having received permission to enter Gaza. The problem was resolved during the dinner, with the Czechs receiving a message that the Israelis had given a green light for a January 22 visit. Livni told the ministers to call her if there were additional problems.

¶4. (C) EU ministers also pressed for Israel to provide for a permanent opening of Gaza for people and goods, in accordance with the 2005 agreement. Livni responded that Israel believes that if Gaza is reopened without involvement of the PA in the border crossings, the opening would legitimize Hamas. The EU ministers told Livni they are ready to reactivate the EU's Rafah border crossing mission, but the need for PA participation remains a stumbling block. Livni reiterated that Israel does not want to do anything that legitimizes Hamas.

15. (C) Regarding the broader situation, the EU ministers asked what Israel wanted the EU to do to help ensure that the cease-fire became permanent. Livni focused on the problem of arms flows to Hamas, saying there was a need to control the flow all along the line from Iran to Gaza. She noted that some states have already made offers, referring to UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown's offer of help, and the recently signed Memorandum of Understanding with the U.S. She said cooperation was needed on intelligence regarding shipments and said Israel wanted to find ways to intervene on the seas to stop shipments. The German Foreign Minister noted he had talks in Egypt last weekend regarding Germany's offer of technical equipment to help monitor the tunnels. Several ministers talked about assistance to Egyptian Bedouins to help them find other means of earning a living than through smuggling. Livni was critical of any suggestion of a UN Security Council resolution on the matter, arguing that a UNSC resolution on arms flows to Lebanon had not had any impact.

16. (C) Smetanka said that several ministers mentioned to Israel that they supported the process of upgrading EU relations with Israel (through an enhanced Association Agreement, work on which is on hold for now because of the Gaza conflict) and wanted to help, not harm, Israel. The ministers emphasized that none of their governments wanted to help Hamas, that they wanted to find ways to strengthen the PA, and that they felt opening Gaza was important in that effort.

17. (C) The meeting with Livni will be followed on Sunday,

BRUSSELS 00000084 002 OF 002

January 25, by a meeting between the 27 EU foreign ministers and their four counterparts from Egypt, Jordan, Turkey, and the PA. Smetanka said the agenda and format will be similar, with EU ministers coordinating prior to a dinner. The focus will be on how to make the cease-fire permanent and how to improve the situation in Gaza. There will be discussion of how to help Egypt control the tunnels (especially given Egypt's sensitivities over its sovereignty) and how to reopen the EU's Rafah mission.

18. (C) Smetanka also said that there had been a bit of discussion about the idea of a donors conference. He noted that the Czechs had announced their willingness to host a conference in Prague, but that the idea was "not warmly welcomed" by many in the EU. (Note: Charge and other Mission officers heard complaints from some EU representatives in Brussels about requests for the EU to rebuild what Israel had destroyed. End Note.) He noted there was also some sensitivity from Egypt about the conference and asked the latest U.S. thinking on the matter.

19. (C) Comment: While Smetanka noted the unity of the Foreign Ministers' message at the meeting with Livni, there is still quite a bit of debate among member states, at the parliament, and among EU officials over Gaza and relations with Israel. In their arrival statements to the press, individual foreign ministers stressed the importance of immediate relief and permanent opening of the borders. The Finnish Foreign Minister declared that, while it was not yet time to talk to Hamas, "there is no global solution without Hamas." At the Parliament, the EU Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, Louis Michel, denounced what he called violations of humanitarian law on both sides, with heavy criticism of Israel. The issue of opening Gaza is not a new one for the Europeans and they will almost surely continue to press the issue as key to undermining Hamas. End Comment.

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